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Grenville J. Kent
Avondale College of Higher Education, grenville@rema.tv

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My Reading? Your Reading? Author(ity) and Postmodern Hermeneutics

Grenville JR Kent

We believe that each man must find the truth that is right for him.
Reality will adapt accordingly.
The universe will readjust.
History will alter.
We believe that there is no absolute truth
Excepting the truth that there is no absolute truth.
We believe in the rejection of creeds.
- Steve Turner, 'Creed'[1]

Abstract: This essay examines postmodern theories relevant to biblical hermeneutics, then examines two 'special interest' readings of the book of Ruth—Queer and Postcolonial—and evaluates them. It examines James Barr's critique of postmodern 'readings', then attempts an original reading—Racist—as a *reductio ad absurdum* to demonstrate that postmodern relativity can sustain no arguments against fascism. It examines fundamentalist flirtation with postmodernism and critiques Walter Brueggemann's early optimism. It then evaluates the usefulness and otherwise of postmodern hermeneutics.

Introduction

Postmodernism, a loosely related group of memes in philosophy, cultural theory, gender relations, design, the arts and popular culture, also has its own literary hermeneutics. Its philosophical stance is skepticism, as expressed by Jean-Francois Lyotard's 1979 call to rebel against 'grand narratives', those inherited 'universal theories of Western culture'.[2]

One key concept is Jacques Derrida's late-60s term 'deconstruction', which means to read a text not for one 'true' meaning but for many possibilities of mean-

1. Steven Turner, *Up To Date* (London: Lion, 1982), 138–139.
2. Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge', in *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, edited by Stuart Sim (London & New York: Routledge, 2001), 3.

ing, including those contrary to the author's apparent intentions. Derrida advocated close reading to notice 'hierarchies', 'repressed contradictions and inherent vulnerabilities' rather than a consistent viewpoint, and saw the text as an unfinished network of other texts rather than a representation of reality. He wanted to 'expose, reverse and dismantle binary oppositions', the (structuralist) use of chaos and order, darkness and light, etc, where one term is always privileged and the other denigrated.[3] Derrida attacked 'logocentricity', 'the assumption that words can unproblematically communicate meanings'; he claimed that the meanings of words lacked 'internal stability'.[4] Postmodern literary theory emphasises the reader's role in constructing meanings, rather than text containing truth from the Author-Authority. (Ironically these authors used words themselves, and expected readers to understand.)

In 1968, Roland Barthes wrote of 'The Death of the Author'.[5] He argues that the Author is merely 'a modern figure', an Enlightenment construct of 'positivism' and 'capitalist ideology', and that one can never know who is speaking in literature—the author? the hero? wisdom?—because 'writing is the destruction of every voice', and the text's history is irretrievable or irrelevant: 'every text is eternally written *here and now*'.[6]

> We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the message of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writing, none of them original, blend and clash.

Barthes' brief essay does not demonstrate this point, but merely asserts that 'we' (a term not defined) 'now know'.

> Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing.
> [But] 'refusing to assign . . . an ultimate meaning . . . to the text (and to the world as text) liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases—reason, science, law.

This is a creedal statement of postmodern hermeneutics, leaving meanings open and doubting whether ultimate meaning exists. Postmodern thinkers would indeed refuse God, reason, science and law as self-serving meta-narratives constructed by society's power elites.

The social and historical location of the first postmodernists suggests revolutionary political motives—manning the intellectual barricades to end the reign of Ultimate Truth, crying *Liberte!* and bringing in the mob rule of self-made meaning. Barthes was a Communist organiser in the 1968 Paris riots and his authorship is unmistakably alive here:

> We are now beginning to let ourselves be fooled no longer by the arrogant antiphrastical recriminations of the good society . . . the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author[7]

Barthes distinguished between 'readerly' and 'writerly' texts. Readerly texts make one a reader, passively consuming and responding in a predetermined way: eg a 19th century realist novel with a careful plot, omniscient narrator and moral purpose. In 'writerly' texts, by contrast, the reader 'is actively involved in the production of textual meaning', filling in gaps and even writing endings. Barthes claimed writerly texts rebel against hegemony[8] and free the reader. Yet later critics have argued that writerly texts are equally manipulative in a covert way.[9]

Michel Foucault also problematised the notion of Author, suggesting the 'author-function' was an Enlightenment construct,[10] as was the very notion of 'man' or a stable, unified 'self' (hence the phrase 'death of man'[11]). Foucault analysed the relationship between power and knowledge, and described 'discourses', the 'specialised languages and the networks of power relations operating in and defining a given field.'[12]

These theories were initially wildly controversial, but by about the 1990s they were widely accepted. After an intellectual 'trickle-down effect' they were eventually picked up by biblical studies, encouraging varied readings including political/economic,[13] postcolonial, feminist, gay/lesbian, environmental/'Vegetarian',[14]

3. After Lyotard, 'Postmodern Condition, *op cit*, 222.
4. See Sim, *Companion to Postmodernism*, 306–307.
5. Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Noonday Press, 1978), 142–148.
6. *Ibid*,143, italics his.
7. *Ibid*, 143. Antiphrasis is '[u]se of words in a sense opposite to their customary meaning', *OED*.
8. Hegemony is the way the ruling class imposes its ideology on the mass of the population so that it seems to be the natural order of things. After Lyotard, 'Postmodern Condition', *op cit*, 275.
9. Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970). See Lyotard, 'Postmodern Condition', *op cit*, 347–348, 382.
10. Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. D. F. Bourchard, translated by DF Bourchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 124–127.
11. Lyotard, 'Postmodern Condition', *op cit*, 246.
12. *Ibid*, 245.
13. For example, Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991).
14. See David JA Clines, *Job 1 – 20*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), l–lii.

Christian,[15] and even atheistic.[16] For postmodern theology, authority is not sited in an ancient text but in the reader's reception, or in the political power of 'reading communities' (for example, church tradition, magisterium,[17] lobby groups).

Let us now consider two contemporary applications of postmodern hermeneutics:

Queer Readings

In *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*,[18] Ken Stone welcomes 'the development of "queer theory" out of the intersection of lesbian and gay studies and so-called 'postmodern" thought'.[19] He welcomes the 'rapid transformation' of Biblical studies 'with the appearance of a range of new interpretive questions and types of reading, many of which are now . . . grouped together . . . under the rubric of "postmodern" biblical interpretation'. For Stone, 'the proliferation of queer readings of the Bible seems today like a real future possibility—if not, unfortunately, very much of a present reality'.[20]

Timothy Koch, in 'Cruising as Methodology: Homoeroticism and the Scriptures',[21] deploys an interesting reading strategy. Koch owns his social location: 'I am a gay man and therefore my own guiding sensibility is homoerotic . . . I cannot and do not presume to speak for anyone else.' He declares his motive as 'hunger for an effective strategy to deal with the attacks . . . putatively based on . . . anti-homosexual Scriptures.' He rejects three 'hermeneutics currently employed by gay men': one, piling up arguments (philological etc) to win control, which for Koch seems like power-grabbing modernism; two, using the trump-card argument of love and acceptance (his example is Bishop Spong), which Koch sees as another attempt to control behaviour; three, trying to fit gay people into other scriptural categories (for example, eunuchs). Koch's hermeneutic clearly locates authority in the reader, not the text:

> I name the locus of my authority as intrinsic, and do not look to these or any texts to be normative for my life or my ethics . . . I seek to allow my own deep knowing, my own homoerotic power, to be the light by which I do my reading, thinking, believing.[22]

15. *Ibid*, liv-lvi.
16. Mark Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).
17. Anthony C Thiselton, *et al*, *The Promise of Hermeneutics* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1999), 158.
18. *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*, edited by Ken Stone (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2001).
19. *Ibid*, 20.
20. *Ibid*, 11.
21. Koch, 'Cruising as Methodology: Homoeroticism and the Scriptures', in Stone, *Queer Commentary*, *op cit*, 169–180.
22. *Ibid*, 174.

His hermeneutic involves 'using our [gay men's] own ways of knowing', and is called 'cruising' (a term which usually means looking for gay partners) 'in a bar, in an internet chatroom, or in the pages of Holy Scripture'.[23] His goal is not 'institutional validation', but reading 'because we want to, because we can'.[24]

Koch cruises 'Elijah, the Hairy Leather-Man'[25] and is attracted to him. He cruises Elisha,[26] who he says is wearing baldness as a sign of mourning for his lost 'companion' and who refuses taunting by young men. 'This scenario felt to me, in my bones, just like a queer-baiting'. Koch footnotes Ruth and Naomi as a queer couple.[27] He acknowledges that you may doubt his conclusions, but counters that you may also doubt whether a man is gay or not.

Rebecca Alpert, in 'Finding Our Past: A Lesbian Interpretation of the Book of Ruth,'[28] sketches contemporary Jewish lesbian liturgy and experience. She seeks 'lesbian role models' through 'imaginative reconstruction of the texts', which must be 'read through the lens of lesbian feminist experience'. Alpert writes:

> A Jewish lesbian midrash on Ruth requires that we read between the lines of the text and imagine Ruth and Naomi to be lovers. To lesbians, this is not implausible . . . We insist on our right to find hints of the existence of women like ourselves in the past where we can.[29]

Postcolonial Readings

In 1978, Edward Said's *Orientalism* used Foucaultian theory to expose Eurocentric hegemony in representation of non-Europeans as 'the Other'. Since then postcolonial theorists and have applied postmodern theory of language, gender, subjectivity and race,[30] doing to cultural studies what the anti-western *Dances With Wolves* did to the Western film genre: reversing the point of view and political polarity, seeing 'them' as 'us'. One early application to biblical studies was Robert Allen Warrior's 1989 reading of the exodus narrative, 'A Native American Perspective: Canaanites, Cowboys and Indians'.[31]

23. *Ibid*, 180.
24. *Ibid*, 175.
25. 2 Kings 1:2–8.
26. 1 Kings 2:23–25.
27. Koch, 'Cruising as Methodology', *op cit*, 180.
28. Rebecca Alpert, 'Finding our Past: A Lesbian Interpretation of the Book of Ruth', in *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story*, edited by JA Kates and GT Reimer (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994).
29. *Ibid*, 92–93.
30. See Lyotard, 'Postmodern Condition', *op cit*, 336.
31. Reproduced in RS Sugirthirajah, *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible In the Third World* (London: SPCK, 1991), 235–241.

Laura Donaldson's essay 'The Sign of Orpah: Reading Ruth Through Native Eyes'[32] favors Orpah and the Moabite point of view. It begins:

> The act of reading the Bible has been fraught with difficulty and contradiction for indigenous peoples . . . and [has] facilitated what we now call culturecide . . . [Yet] Native peoples have actively resisted deracinating processes by reading the Bible on their own terms, for example, choosing with which characters to identify rather than accepting colonisers' values.[33]

She outlines the Israelite perspective of Moabites as sexually corrupting, based on a name suggestive of incest,[34] on history[35] and on their legal exclusion from worship for ten generations.[36] Citing Randall Bailey's article, 'They're Nothing but Incestuous Bastards',[37] she argues 'dehumanisation through graphic sexual innuendo' is used to justify David's mass slaughter of Moabites.[38] Donaldson also finds Native American women being equated with Moabites in early US Christian readings of *Ruth*, including statements by Thomas Jefferson, second US president and co-framer of the Constitution. For Jefferson, she claims, Ruth-like assimilation was the 'final solution to the seemingly irresolvable "Indian problem"'.[39] Donaldson quotes Cherokee scholar Rayna Green on this 'Pocahontas Perplex', where Ruth links up with a man whose nation is bent on destroying her national culture and blotting out its memory,[40] as a rewriting of 'one of Euramerica's most important master narratives about Native women'.[41] Donaldson derives the name Orpah from *'orep (BDB*7686) meaning the back of the neck because Orpah turns her back and leaves Naomi; she is the 'abandoner'.[42] 'To Cherokee women . . . Orpah connotes hope rather than perversity, because she is the one who does not reject her traditions or her sacred ancestors.'[43] For Donaldson, Orpah is 'the story's central character'.[44]

Sugirtharajah would call this postcolonial 'reading as resistance', which sees liberation 'not as something hidden or latent in the text, but rather as born of public consensus in democratic dialogue between text and context', and which is 'not confined to a particular religious source'.[45] This contrasts with liberation hermeneutics, which sees 'liberation as something . . . located in the biblical texts', and which stays 'within the bounds of Christianity'. The key difference is whether the text or one's own ethical platform has higher authority.

Musa Dube, in 'Divining Ruth for International Relations,'[46] borrows her hermeneutic from a custom of the 'Batswana and other southern Africans': 'reading a divining set [of carved bone characters] with a professional diviner healer' to diagnose social and relational problems. They request divine guidance, have the reader select a character (eg a young woman-shaped piece), then study the relations among the pieces. Thus each reader 'writes and reads her/ his own story with the diviner healer in the reading session'. The Batswana, hearing the Bible from early missionaries, took it as a divination set, and many healers still use it as such.

> These readers attest that Ruth, like any other text, is a mine or mosaic of social relations, where readers can take their pick . . . [and] see and relate these social relations to their own social relationships.[47]

Dube selects the 'experiences of Ruth in Judah and the experiences of Naomi in Moab.'[48] Her conclusion: African 'nations need to acknowledge and develop a relationship of liberating interdependence.'

Evaluation

These readings provide intriguing reception-history. They demonstrate the tendency of a group or individual to read according their presuppositions, a valuable caution for any reader.

Koch's reading is creative, but could be critiqued for its lack of attention to textual details. It adduces no evidence that Elisha was Elijah's lover, or that the taunting was anti-homosexual. Koch feels that in his bones, an 'osteo-herme-

32. Laura Donaldson, 'The Sign of Orpah: Reading Ruth Through Native Eyes', in *Ruth and Esther: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, second series, edited by Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 130–144.
33. *Ibid*, 130–131.
34. The traditional derivation, reflected in Genesis 19:36–37, is from *min* (from) and *'ab* (father), producing a pun on *me'abihen* ('from their father') in verse 36.
35. Numbers 25:1–3.
36. Deuteronomy 23:3.
37. Randall Bailey, 'They're Nothing but Incestuous Bastards: The Polemical Use of Sex and Sexuality in the Hebrew Canon Narratives', in *Reading from This Place. Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*, edited by GF Segovia and MA Tolbert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1995), 121–138.
38. 2 Samuel 8:2; and the Ammonites who were (very!) closely related (2 Sam 12:26–31).
39. Donaldson, 'The Sign of Orpah', 137.
40. Deuteronomy 12:3.
41. Donaldson, 'The Sign of Orpah', *op cit*, 139.
42. *Ibid*, 141–142.
43. *Ibid*, 143.
44. *Ibid*, 142.
45. RS Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 261–262.
46 Musa W Dube, 'Divining Ruth for International Relations' in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*, edited by Musa W Dube, (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 179–195.
47 Dube, 'Divining Ruth,' 180.
48 Dube, 'Divining Ruth,' 187.

neutic' that is subjective and offers little or nothing to convince readers outside Koch's reading group. Such reading 'through a glass queerly'[49] compares unfavorably to the work of William Countryman[50] who argues for similar conclusions on the basis of serious scholarly exegesis. Koch's reading ignores standard interpretive practices and could be seen as using a hermeneutic of convenience for 'spin-doctoring' purposes.

Alpert's article commendably opposes discrimination. It is quite 'imaginative', and frank about reading 'between the lines', 'through the lens of lesbian experience'. It briefly cites Ruth 1:16–17 as a lesbian couple's vow without giving reasons for this view, and otherwise ignores textual details. Other views are not engaged. Its appeals are emotive and personal: 'Making room for lesbian interpretations of the Book of Ruth is a way of welcoming lesbians into the contemporary Jewish community.' To question that, then, could seem personally prejudiced and exclusive. Alpert frankly acknowledges that 'less plausible midrashim have been accepted throughout the ages', and hopes 'our midrash will find an honored place in Jewish tradition'[51], a political process which creates accepted truths or, in post-modernist terms, a reading group which creates meaning for a text. Queering *Ruth* may make synagogue or church feel more inclusive and appealing for some, yet it cannot genuinely be sustained as *Ruth*'s theme, or aligned with other texts in the canon[52], including laws that are anything but open, writerly texts.[53] It is wish fulfillment without a textual word in its favor.

Donaldson's conclusions would be welcomed by anyone concerned for human rights, yet the reasoning behind them is debatable. Can Orpah really be the hero and central character of a narrative that mentions her twice and ignores her for its last three-quarters? Orpah is introduced in parallel with Ruth[54] and functions as a foil, providing negative contrast to Ruth's positive choice (as the unnamed relative does for Boaz in Ruth 4:1–6). Donaldson's derivation of Orpah's name is inventive but debatable. The name may be Moabite rather than Hebrew, and many derivations are suggested: the Hebrew *'arp* (BDB7446) 'to drop like dew'; the Ugaritic *'rpt* and Hebrew *'arip* meaning 'clouds', with a possible link to Baal the rider of clouds; or as cognate with the Arabic *'urf* 'mane' and referring to luxurious hair, or *'arf* 'scent'. Further, Donaldson's reading simplistically equates Israel with the invading, colonising culture and Moab with the indigenous colonised. This ignores Israel's regular victimisation by superpowers in biblical history, and particularly the immediate context when Moab oppressed Israel.[55] More nuanced sociological analysis is required. Donaldson's reading also ignores the canonical statement that Yahweh's order to destroy Moabite culture was based on moral judgment,[56] not on a racist model of genetic inferiority as in nineteenth century Darwinism. Ruth's acceptance into Israel's royal genealogy suggests the exclusion was not based on genes[57]. The Moabites anyway shared ancestry with Israel.

Donaldson commendably aims to advance human rights, and subordinates the text to this political agenda. Yet, ironically, lamentable abuses of human rights occurred when colonisers subordinated Scripture to their society's political consensus, rather than recognising the Bible's ethical authority. Texts were made to serve a colonialist worldview and the power relations of empire were seen as natural—as postmodernism ably exposes. (This cautionary tale that should make Westerners check our cultural sureties today.) Yet Scripture portrays Yahweh as freeing slaves. Would that not suggest that a Bible featuring Yahweh (and claiming Yahweh's inspiration) would be a liberationist text and one deserving to be properly understood rather than resisted? The Bible claims to be a text with moral power, not simply a blank screen for each generation or social group to project whatever ethics are convenient.

Dube's method is fascinating cross-culturally, yet the conclusions come more from the diviner rather than the text: why then use the Bible rather than a newspaper, or Rorshach ink blots? And the Bible is hardly compatible with divination.[58]

49. Lori Rowlett, 'Violent Femms and S/M: Queering Samson and Delilah', in *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*, edited Ken Stone (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press), 106–115.
50. William Countryman, *Dirt, Sex and Greed* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1988). For a response, see Thomas E Schmidt, *Straight & Narrow: Compassion and Clarity in the Homosexual Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995).
51. Alpert, 'Finding our Past,' 95–96.
52. Genesis 19, Judges 19, Ezekiel 16:49–50. For Christians, Rom 1:26, 1 Corinthians 6:9–11; 1 Timothy 1:9–11; 2 Peter 2:6–7; Jude 7.
53. Discussions often include Leviticus 18:22; 20:13. Deuteronomy 22:5; 23:17,18.
54. Robert L Hubbard, Jr, *The Book of Ruth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 94.
55. See Judges 3:14.
56. See Deuteronomy 23:3–6; Leviticus 18, especially 1–4. Contra Randall C Bailey, 'The Danger of Ignoring One's Own Cultural Bias', in *The Postcolonial Bible*, edited by RS Sugirtharajah (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), who argues that Canaanites and Egyptians are racially maligned as practitioners of sexual taboos in Leviticus 18:2–30, just as Gentiles are sexually labelled in Ephesians 4:19 and Galatians 5:19. Yet the Galatians reference does not mention race; it concerns fallen humanity, so is irrelevant to this question. Bailey also takes Rom 1:26–27 as applying to Jews, which is inaccurate since it concerns 'mankind' (*cf* 1:18) and would in any case be race-neutral from a Jewish writer. Bailey reads in sexual innuendoes about Blacks ('more sexually endowed and active', 'voracious' and 'animal like'). He says these were a 'lynchpin in our oppression' (p 78) which regrettably may well be true, and yet he does not make the case that these views come from the Scriptures. Israel's disapproval of Gentile practices is too easily equated with racism.
57. Further see Mark G Brett, *Ethnicity and the Bible* (Leiden: EJ Brill, 1996), 161–165.
58. For example, Deuteronomy 18:10–12; Jeremiah 14:14; Ezekiel 12:24.

Questioning Postmodernism

Text critic James Barr turns the hermeneutics of suspicion onto postmodernism itself:

First, postmodern readings can 'sound incredibly individualistic: anyone can read anything in any way he likes', but reader-responses need sensible limits and controls. 'For . . . people just to read their own ideas and ideologies into the Bible is an invitation to folly and chaos.'[59] Are texts mere ventriloquists' dummies that will let any hand move their mouths? Few writers set out to produce blank screens for anyone's psychological projections. Is the reader morally equipped to ignore past insights and seize the authority of the author? If so, why write at all?

Second, whose values should be read in? Postmodernism prefers de-centering, anti-oppression values. But why these? Will there be 'organised discussion of these and other possible values . . . or will it be decided by power and influence?'[60] Barr claims these values have become 'the essential dogmas of the modern liberal churches and institutions. They have replaced the older ecclesiastical dogmas but assumed a similar function of control.'[61] Today, some ideas are 'canonical or authoritative, at least in the sense that it will be dangerous to dispute them.'[62]

Third, 'why should the Bible, once detached from its church connections and academic captivities, be so important for us to read at all?' If it is only one text among many, the Bible can be labeled the sexist, racist empire building of dead white males and ignored—unless one lobby group wants to co-opt the Bible's remaining influence over some other groups.

Fourth, many 'readings' are shallow and unscholarly: we see 'the dominance of theory over serious knowledge, the absence of connection with religious traditions . . . '[63] Barr's nightmare is that 'Derrida and Foucault will become more familiar than . . . Brown, Driver and Briggs.'[64]

Fifth, readings should not be done in isolation, despite post-modern suspicion of totalising metanarratives. Readings are not theology unless 'related to a network of conceptions of God and his relations with the world.'[65]

Sixth, many theological readings display uncritical acceptance of postmodernism, and many scholars have not critically read the post-modern philosophers but are merely following fashion.[66]

59. James Barr, *History and Ideology in the Old Testament: Biblical Studies at the End of a Millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 156.
60. Barr, *History and Ideology*, 154–155.
61. *Ibid*, 152.
62. *Ibid*, 152–153.
63. *Ibid*, 156.
64. *Ibid*, 28.
65. *Ibid*, 155.
66. *Ibid*, 158.

Seventh, I would add that the term 'reading' is antiphrastical, fuddling or even deceptive in phrases like 'oppositional reading', 'subversive reading' or 'reading against the grain'. Barthes frankly differentiated writerly and readerly texts, and some of what are today called readings should be called re-writings.

Racist Reading: A Reductio Ad Absurdum

Postmodernism can self-deconstruct when taken to its logical conclusion. To demonstrate the extreme malleability of postmodern hermeneutics by a *reductio ad absurdum*, let us now attempt a racist reading of *Ruth*.

I am writing as a fool[67] to make a point, yet it would not be hard to find a racist reading group among white supremacist Bible-readers today, or a centuries-old interpretive tradition such as the covenant theology behind South Africa's *apartheid* era, which read Africans as 'unbelieving black "Canaanites"' ('certainly not among the "elect"'), the British Army as Pharaoh, and the Voortrekkers as the new covenant race, 'God's people' who 'acted according to His will', so that 'He delivered them out of the hands of their enemies and gave them their freedom in the promised land'.[68] There may be an even more ancient rabbinic tradition of Philistine-hating:

> Gender and race fantasy about the Philistines reaches an extreme in the rabbinic story that Goliath was descended from Orpah . . . As Orpah returned home . . . she was raped by a hundred Philistines and a dog (the dog comes from 1 Sam. 17:43, the hundred Philistines from the foreskins of chap 18). David and Goliath descend in parallel lines from Ruth and Orpah.[69]

So to attempt a racist reading, *Ruth* is a warning against miscegenation and corruption by foreigners: God put them in their own countries,[70] and *Ruth* shows the dire results of interfering with that. Foreigners promise loyalty to anyone for citizenship, preying on the old and the vulnerable, moving on to the ruling class using their unnatural sexual appetites as a weapon. They trade on sympathy.

67. In good company, *cf* 2 Corinthians 11:23.
68. T Dunbar Moodie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom: Power, Apartheid and the Afrikaner Civil Religion* (Berkeley, LA & London: University of California Press, 1975), 5, 26, 28. He cites President Paul Kruger as an example of this belief.
69. David Jobling and Catherine Rose, 'Reading As A Philistine', in Brett, *Ethnicity, op cit.* They cite *Midrash Rabbah* Ruth 1:14.
70. Deuteronomy 32:8; Acts 17:26. In his chapter in Dr G Cronje's 1947 book *Regverdige Rasse-apartheid* (English translation: A Just Racial Separation), the eminent Dutch Reformed theologian Professor EP Groenewald quoted these texts, along with Genesis 11, to argue God had ordained racial separation. See WA De Klerk, *The Puritans in Africa: A Story of Afrikanerdom* (London: Rex Collings, 1975), 221.

Their desperation work ethic brings cutthroat competition that destroys the labor market, displacing national workers. This relentless greed and social climbing of ethnic minorities will destabilise society and threaten the integrity of the nation's highest institutions—family, economy, nobility, leadership. Witness how the conspiracy of world Jewry has seized such power in the USA and globally! Boaz was vulnerable to weak-minded sympathy for foreigners because he was the son of the Canaanite whore Rahab[71]. Later King David, a product of inferior genetic stock, struggled with the Moabite sexual appetite, which was a major factor in his temptations and even the incest amongst his children[72]. Its example corrupted Solomon, whose wives (foreigners again[73]) turned his heart away from God, and his example was repeated throughout *Kings*, which ends tragically. In more enlightened times, like Hitler's Reich, racial purity laws would have excluded David. God's law was even more discerning in excluding Moabites from the temple even when diluted by ten generations of assimilation . . .

Enough of this ridiculous racist reading! Yet postmodernism provides no objective criteria to combat it, nothing beyond personal preference, group disapproval and Nietzschean power reductionism. This reading would be welcome to some reading groups, and quite powerful if backed with violence. Personally I find this racist reading offensive and as justified intellectually as 'reading' *Mein Kampf* as a document of Jewish liberation or *Schindler's List* as a romantic comedy. Yet for postmodernism, any reading is equally valid. Richard Rorty famously admitted he was unable to find within postmodernism a rationale against fascism:

> [W]hen the secret police come, when the torturers violate the innocent, there is nothing to be said to them of the form 'There is something within you which you are betraying . . . there is something beyond these principles which condemns you.'[74]

Rorty cannot mount moral critiques because of his relativism:

> There is nothing deep down inside us except what we have put there ourselves, no criterion that we have not created in the course of creating a practice, no standard of rationality that is not an appeal to such a criterion, no rigorous argumentation that is not obedience to our own conventions.

71. See Matthew 1:5. Donaldson makes this point, 'The Sign of Orpah', *op cit*, 138.
72. Amnon's rape of his half-sister Tamar, 2 Samuel 13:1–22.
73. 1 Kings 11:1–11.
74. Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 189–190.

How ironic that postmodern philosophers, who suffered Nazi invasion as teens, tried to decenter power and ended up failing to offer a logical defense against fascism.

The best defense against this racist reading is the text itself. Given more space, it could be argued that the text commends Ruth the Moabite, both in other characters' words and the narrator's depictions of kind actions. It accepts her into the faith community, narratively rewards her with affirmation (3:11), food security and even wealth (3:16; 2:1), love (4:13), progeny (4:13), public acceptance (4:11–12, 15), and the honour of royal descendants (4:17–22) and even, in canonical context, Messiah as descendant (Matthew 1:5). This Moabite woman is taken under the wings of 'Yahweh, the God of Israel' (Ruth 2:12).

Can a hermeneutical method that allows such extreme relativism really be useful and valid? (Of course this is a different question from asking whether it is true, but asking whether a relativistic philosophy is true is a self-deconstructing question.)

Idealism About Postmodernism

Walter Brueggemann, widely respected for his intuitive, synchronic, literary approach, heralded a brave new hermeneutical era of post-modernism some twenty-five years after its French theorists wrote. His 1993 work *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination*[75] is upbeat that the 'wholly new interpretive situation' of postmodernism is a 'positive opportunity' for the 'the liberation of the Biblical text'[76] since

> church interpretation (especially where historical criticism has been taken with excessive seriousness) has tended to trim and domesticate the text not only to accommodate regnant modes of knowledge, but also to enhance regnant modes of power.

This is classic postmodern vocabulary;[77] Brueggemann even fears the 'tyranny' of 'positivism'. Yet otherwise his sketch of postmodernist bears little resemblance to that of its founding writers, whose works he does not cite. He acknowledges having 'no expertise about the historical and philosophical issues involved in the

75. Walter Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993).
76. *Ibid*, vii.
77. See Michel Foucault, 'On Power', in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984*, edited by LD Kritzman, translated by Alan Sheridan *et al* (New York & London: Routledge, 1988), 96–109; or Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, edited by Colin Gordon (London: Harvester, 1981).

critique of modernity'.[78] Brueggemann's construct of postmodernism can airily dismiss the problem of relativism:

> [T]he threat of unbridled relativism is not, in my judgment, much of a threat. In reality, the dispute boils down to a few competing claims on any issue, and this is not the same as 'anything goes.' I regard relativism as less of a threat than objectivism.[79]

Since then, postmodern interpretations have moved well beyond just a few. One outlying example of this is the atheist reading of Mark Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology.*[80] Assuming God is dead, 'Taylor argues for the elimination of such concepts as self, truth, and meaning. Language does not refer to anything, and truth does not correspond to anything'.[81] One could then ask: Why write in words? Why not paint dada or throw bombs?

Brueggemann opines that a 'postmodern climate recognises that there is no given definit!on and that rival claims must simply be argued out'.[82] This misunderstands postmodernism, which suspects logic itself as another metanarrative 'claiming to provide universal explanations and to be universally valid'.[83] It critiques 'logocentricity', the 'assumption that words can unproblematically communicating meanings'.[84] So rational argument and free speech (both Enlightenment ideas) have no place in Foucault's world of Nietzschean power reductionism. There is no basis for reasoning together, and no external standard agreed for rational argument or moral debate, so the ideology with the most voters, lobbyists and spin doctors likely wins. Postmodernist culture-forming is not an international dialogue moving towards truth, but new tribes locked in a Darwinist struggle where might is right—which sounds, with painful irony, like fascism. Since you cannot reason with your enemies, crush them with political or media power.

Brueggemann believes that 'general scientific positivism is breaking down'.[85] Yet few scientists are postmodern about their work. In *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science,* physicists Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont devastatingly show how later postmodern intellectuals have 'repeatedly abused scientific concepts and terminology'; they target the 'epistemic relativism, namely the idea . . . that modern science is nothing more than a "myth", a "narration" or a "social construction" among many others.'[86]

Brueggemann sees postmodernism as breaking up hegemonies and opening up discussion. Yet has not debate in biblical studies been ever with us?

Despite questioning this idealism about postmodern hermeneutics, it should be said that Brueggemann's commentary is usually commendably fresh, perceptive, challenging to the power elites of his culture, and concerned for the weak and poor.

Fundamentalist Postmodernism?

Support for postmodern hermeneutics has recently come from an unlikely quarter: resurgent neo-fundamentalism. The common ground is a loathing of critical study of the Bible. Barr believes fundamentalists are attracted to a-historical postmodern readings because 'the Bible can be read without all that historical stuff!'[87] Robert Chisholm observes this in evangelicalism:

> Some well-meaning evangelicals deemphasise historical setting and cultural background, arguing that the 'meaning resides in the text'. This affirmation is true as far as it goes, but one must remember that the text is rooted in a historical-cultural context that is inextricably linked to its meaning. To understand what the text meant, we must try to reconstruct this context to the best of our ability, utilising the linguistic and archaeological evidence at our disposal. When a so-called text-centered interpreter fails to do this, one's approach easily degenerates into a reader-oriented analysis . . . [88]

Barr seems surprised that fundamentalists are not more wary of postmodern hermeneutics. First, their bedfellow is a 'totally non-Christian and non-religious philosophy and practice'.[89] Michel Foucault, for example, was a Marxist involved in the 1968 Paris riots,[90] homosexual,[91] reported practitioner of sexual torture

78. Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation,* viii.
79. *Ibid,* 10.
80. Taylor, *Erring, op cit.*
81. McGrath, *Bridge-Building, op cit,* 105.
82. Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation, op cit,* 15.
83. Lyotard, 'Postmodern Condition', *op cit,* 316.
84. *Ibid,* 306–307.
85. Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation, op ci,* 2.
86. Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science* (New York, NY: Picador, 1998). (French *Impostures Intellectuelles,* 1997). They stick to 'epistemic/cognitive relativism, not 'the more delicate issues of moral or aesthetic relativism'. Foucault comments on the institutional coercive power of science in Foucault, 'On Power', 96–109.
87. Barr, *History and Ideology, op cit,* 150.
88. Robert B. Chisholm Jr, *From Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 149–150.
89. Barr, *History and Ideology, op cit,* 150–151.
90. His disappointment at the defeat of these riots and advocacy of smaller, more local causes may be behind his postmodernist suspicion of *grand recits* or meta-narratives like Marxism.
91. Although he rejected the term and others suggesting fixed identity or stable selfhood. See also Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality: 1* (London: Penguin, 1978),

(claimed to have knowingly passed on AIDS in San Francisco sadomasochistic bath-houses[92]), and understood as advocating child sex.[93] This is not an attempted *ad hominem* attack on his theory, but for Christians to expect hermeneutical help from the rebel against textual authority and morality would be ironic. Second, do conservatives really want to abandon claims that the Bible is historically true? 'They may not want critical history, but they do need historical fact'. Third, 'to have truth and rationality disappear out of the window is uncomfortable'. Fourth, reader-response theories may seem to legitimise evangelical readings, but it legitimises anyone's readings and 'this is slippery ground. A more secure foothold is offered if one goes the other way and thinks that the Bible has its own, clear, meaning, which anyone can perceive'.[94]

Responding To Postmodernism

So what can evangelicals do with postmodernism? James Barr dismisses it out of hand: '[T]o utter the word "postmodern" is equivalent to saying "I am now going to start talking nonsense"'.[95] John Barton also rejects it:

> As 'a theory' (sometimes, with staggering imperialism, just 'theory' with no article!) claiming to explain or expose culture, art, meaning and truth, I find postmodernism absurd, rather despicable in its delight in debunking all serious beliefs, decadent and corrupt in its indifference to questions of truth . . . But as a game . . . a way of having fun with words, I find it diverting and entertaining. I enjoy the absurd and the surreal, and postmodernism supplies this in ample measure.[96]

Robert Carroll presents a nuanced view. He critiques the 'theory-driven scholars' who, after the cold precision of structuralism,

> emerged after the 1960s determined to read themselves into the text and to construct reading strategies . . . which would reflect the points of view of their own reader-response approaches to the biblical text.[97]

and *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality 2* (London: Penguin, 1984).

92. Roger Kimball, 'The Perversions of Michel Foucault', www.newcriterion.com/archive/11/mar93/foucault.htm, citing and reviewing Foucault's biography ('hagiography'), James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993). (Accessed January 2003.)
93. See his co-interview on French radio, 1978, transcribed as 'Sexual Morality and the Law', in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984*, edited by LD Kritzman, translated Alan Sheridan *et al* (New York & London: Routledge, 1988), 271–285.
94. Barr, *History and Ideology, op cit,* 150–151.
95. *Ibid*, 30.
96. John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*, second edition (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1996), 235.
97. Robert P Carroll, 'Poststructuralist approaches New Historicism and postmodernism', in *Ibid*, 50.

Yet Carroll acknowledges 'real strengths' in postmodern method when applied to 'specific biblical narratives', especially the 'sophisticated blending of modernist and postmodernist approaches' which 'gives birth to the reader as an active subject in the construction of meaning', and shows 'concerns other than the old-fashioned ones of finding objective meanings in texts which may then be imposed on all readers in authoritarian modes'. These, Carroll finds, can 'rescue . . . the Bible from its ecclesiastical and academic captivities in hermeneutic forms which have become sclerotic over the centuries', and so postmodern-informed readings are 'some of the best work now being done in biblical studies'.[98]

From his different perspective, Anthony Thiselton argues for balance: 'A hermeneutic of promise . . . will steer between the Scylla of Cartesian individualism, which has orphaned itself . . . and the Charybdis of an intralinguistic indeterminacy'.[99] That is, good hermeneutics avoids two extremes: one, taking Descartes ('I think, therefore I am') to the extreme where only my thoughts matter; the other, getting lost in the belief that language has no meaning. Thiselton argues:

> The biblical writings cannot be reduced to a Cartesian textbook of information that permits the response of only wooden replication of ideas or idiosyncratic novelty outside the clear boundaries of the text . . . On the other hand, while many passages of the biblical writings operate with literary productivity that seduces, challenges, surprises, provokes and transforms the expectations of readers, the biblical writings also contain creeds, doctrines, traditions, beliefs, and assertions that cannot be reduced without doing violence to the status of 'literary' or 'open' texts . . . [In the Bible] every degree of coding between fully 'closed' and fully 'open' texts can be found.[100]

How might one tell the difference between open texts and closed texts? One major way is sensitivity to genre and literary techniques. Legal texts aim to preclude other understandings,[101] and one closed part of Ruth is the public legal declaration (4:9–10).[102] An open part of *Ruth* is the scene where Boaz gives Ruth grain (3:15). At a literal level, he is showing *chesed* by giving 30-45 kg of food to a poor im-

98, *Ibid*, 60–6`
99. Thiselton *et al*, *Hermeneutics, op cit*, 151. In Greek mythology, Scylla was a dog-headed monster and Charybdis variously a whirlpool or monster that spewed water three times a day, endangering sailors. Hence they represent opposite extremes to steer between.
100. Thiselton *et al*, *Hermeneutics, op cit,*153.
101. It would be difficult to misread the legalese, purposely redundant command to 'destroy, kill and annihilate' (Esther 3:13).
102. Though even this can be read allegorically as Christ securing the legality of the believer's salvation.

migrant woman after a famine. Yet so soon after the near-seduction scene and her marriage proposal, he asks her to remove part of her clothing and then gives her seed, and one need not be a Jungian analyst to see that he is offering her not just grain but seed—physical love, descendants, parental immortality. Perhaps high modernist scholarship needed postmodernism to centre the pendulum, but faith communities have long known Biblical stories were amazingly adaptable and universally relevant; Robert Alter writes of narratives multi-layered enough to 'generate three thousand years of exegesis, with no end in sight'.[103]

Postmodern hermeneutics, while no natural ally of Bible-believing Christianity, can be catalytic in some ways:

1. They challenge one's presuppositions, easy assumptions and traditions, and make one *look again at the text,* which can humble interpretive arrogance. Yet, 'while "right" understandings remain dynamic, polymorphic and irreducible to a single simplified concept, some "understandings" are clearly *wrong.*'[104]
2. Postmodern writers encourage readers to confront 'the Other' rather than just one's own ego.[105] The assumptions of one's own gender, class, socio-economics, race, etc. seem only natural, yet postmodernism shows how the same story reads differently in Beverly Hills and Baghdad. However, postmodernism too easily allows readers to shop for a like-minded reading group, to de-emphasise confronting truths and find teachers for itching ears, and to remain self-serving. Less textually respectful postmodern 'readings' cross the line between genuine re-interpretation and mere spin. Readers need to ask ourselves the question: do we want to understand the text or project our own views onto it? Perhaps the ancient proverb is relevant: 'Fools have no interest in understanding; they only want to air their own opinions.'[106] Reason-based discussion, however modernist, is a valuable preventative against 'solipsism and relativism'.[107]
3. In raising awareness of radically different ways audiences read Scripture, postmodern hermeneutics can offer insights for cross-cultural ministry. Yet this should not be a license for the reader to assume God-like powers over the text. Readers should approach the text expecting to learn something, and should be changed by the text rather than vice-versa. Writers should be assumed to have some skill in making their thoughts understood. Language may not be perfectly accurate, but it works: a kiss is still a kiss, whether literal[108] or metaphoric.[109] Beyond this, Divine inspiration should be considered (*cf* Prov 30:5, 6).
4. Postmodern scholars often encourage readers to question power, even though postmodernism itself lacks the necessary motivation to do so. Robert Morgan points out this irony:

> The recent explosion of biblical study into a bewildering variety of literary possibilities is likely to weaken its revolutionary potential and indirectly support the *status quo*. It requires a strong belief in rationality for biblical scholarship and interpretation to speak with a sufficiently strong common voice to achieve institutional change.[110]

Morgan claims traditional Christian ways of reading already challenge power, stimulating positive revolutionary thinking and action in Christian communities beyond what postmodernist readings will do.

5. Postmodern hermeneutics tend to bring contemporary concerns to the text. These are crucial in keeping an ancient text relevant across time; yet equally crucial are objective controls, notably those of historical-grammatical exegesis. Some contemporary questions can be answered only in principle or by analogy, and some perhaps not at all. For example, what does *Ruth* say about the ethics of new reproductive technologies or genetic engineering? One may seek precedents in the Mosaic principles of levirate marriage narrated in Ruth, or the answer may be, 'Nothing'.

These contributions can be valuable but ultimately the text itself, in 'canonical-historical context' and with help from 'historical, literary, and canonical controls', must define its own interpretation, otherwise readings can multiply infinitely and become 'embarrassingly narcissistic', yielding 'shallow politicisation instead of convincing interpretation'.[111]

103. Robert Alter, *Canon and Creativity: Modern Writing and the Authority of Scripture* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2000), 16.
104. Thiselton *et al*, *Hermeneutics, op cit,* 142.
105. *Ibid*, 133–134.
106. Proverbs 18:2, NLT.
107. David Jasper, 'Literary readings of the Bible', in Barton, *Old Testament, op cit,* 27. Solipsism is 'in philosophy, the view or theory that only the self really exists or can be known. Now also, isolation, self-centredness, selfishness.' (OED).
108. Song of Songs 1:1 (Heb 1:2).
109. Psalm 85:10.
110. Morgan, in Barton, *Old Testament, op cit,* 126.
111. Michael S Moore, *The Book of Ruth, NIBC* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2000), 298.

Scripture records a model of how to respond. Apostolic preaching was, in postmodern terms, a new Christian 'reading' of the Hebrew Bible and quite threatening to the reading group(s) of Judaism. Synagogue members in Berea[112] were commended for not blindly holding a traditional reading. They searched (not just superficially browsed) the Scriptures (the text, not traditions or theory) daily (not just once as if there was nothing left to learn) to see (which suggests one can know and see, at least with reasonable certainty) whether these things were true (suggesting truth exists and is knowable, however imperfectly).

Understanding ancient texts requires linguistic and historical competence humbly provided by experts trained in using rational controls and dialogue with others, and applied by faith communities forging a theology through the struggles of life experience. Thus there can be proper confidence as well as constant searching for new understanding. Without becoming lost in literary games or falling down the epistemological mineshafts of postmodernism, people can use various methods to search the text for principles that speak to contemporary questions.

If space permitted, we could outline the major themes and many sub-themes of *Ruth*—God's character and interventions; *chesed,* both human and divine; the gospel of grace and redemption; Gentile inclusion and world mission; self-righteousness and ethnocentrism; marriage; ethical workplace relations, and many more. Clear themes can be seen, yet no explanation can claim to be the last word. 'People yet unborn'[113] should see fresh relevance and gospel liberation in the story.

112. Acts 17:10–11.
113. Psalm 22:30–31